

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #1570/01 2232337
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 102337Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1179
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 4619
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 8894
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4746
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR PRIORITY 1713
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG PRIORITY 3793
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSFK SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001570

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2018
TAGS: [KN](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ELTN](#) [MARR](#)
SUBJECT: VISIT TO RURAL DPRK: AGRARIAN, ORDERLY, QUIET

REF: SEOUL 1528

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a June 30-July 5 visit to North Korea to evaluate the beginnings of the U.S. food aid program (ref A), Poloff and USAID officers spent three days in Pyongyang and also traveled to two port cities to the southwest--Nampo and Songrim--and four agricultural towns farther north--Hyangsan, Unsan, Huichon (two overnights) and Tongshin. During these trips, covering about 200 miles and touching on four of the DPRK's ten provinces, we observed:

Empty roads and ragtag transportation: Notably, a 10-lane smooth highway to Nampo with only a few broken-down vehicles visible, and dozens of charcoal-burning trucks in Chagang Province.

Arable land: Rice (in flat areas), corn (on slopes) and other crops were growing in apparently healthy condition in most areas, notably along both sides of the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway.

Decently dressed people: Expecting signs of abject poverty, instead we saw people dressed for school or work in simple but clean clothing moving in an orderly fashion by bicycle or on foot. The exception was Songrim, where poverty was evident.

Intact housing: Both in the many collective farms we passed and in the villages, housing and apartments appeared drab but structurally sound, often made of whitewashed cement with tile roofs similar to that seen in South Korea; we did not see the interiors. All but a few windows had glass, and in Huichon as well as Pyongyang, seen at night, faint lights were on in apartments.

Military Presence: Not obvious in most places. Most notable was a checkpoint about 25 km north of Pyongyang, where all passengers were screened and vehicles examined.

Interest in South Korea and the U.S.: During hours of travel with English-speaking minders from the Korean American Private Exchange Society (KAPES), an offshoot of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we heard both set-piece propaganda and genuine curiosity about life in South Korea and the U.S.

Anti-U.S. propaganda: The only graphic example we saw was,

ironically, given DPRK eagerness to receive U.S. food aid, a mural in a Public Distribution Center in Huichon depicting a U.S. soldier pounding a large nail into a North Korean's head.

END SUMMARY.

ON THE ROAD

¶2. (C) Everywhere except Pyongyang, where there was a always a car or two in view (about like the volume of traffic on Yongsan Garrison in Seoul), roads were deserted -- a striking contrast compared to even the most rural parts of South Korea. On the empty 40-km-long 10-lane road to Nampo, our driver proceeded at 50 mph, meandering to avoid a few dips and potholes, and passing about a dozen broken down jeeps and other vehicles on the sides of the road, as well as occasional bicyclists and pedestrians, and only a few moving buses and other cars. Later on July 1 we covered 30 km of the four-lane Pyongyang-Kaesong expressway, again almost alone on the road. Pavement (cement and asphalt) was in good condition, with thick hedgerows growing on the median strip for most of that distance. The 200-km drive to Huichon (the terminus of the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway) was similar, with about one other car seen per minute during the first 30 km, and thereafter almost none. On the return trip, a silver Volkswagen Passat passed our cars at high speed; our minder said it carried "a more senior official."

¶3. (SBU) Off of these highways, road conditions quickly deteriorated. The dirt and gravel road to Songrim, about 20 km starting from the turnoff from the Pyongyang-Kaesong expressway, was a challenge for our 1980 Mercedes sedans, which had to maneuver through person-sized dips and around a coal-filled truck that had slid off the road, a sign that hauling cargo from Songrim's port is a challenge. Later, we took dirt and gravel roads from Huichon to Unsan and to Tongshin, in each case passing individuals and small crews apparently assigned to throw dirt into holes after vehicles went by; one of the crews was made up of teenagers dressed in "Young Pioneer" outfits of white shirts and red kerchiefs. Our minders checked the sky before we left Huichon for Tongshin, saying they would not want to try that road in the rain.

¶4. (SBU) Everywhere there was a sense of making do with whatever operating vehicle was at hand: a bus in Pyongyang was filled to the window tops with cabbages. In Songrim, our driver inadvertently took us to the wrong port entrance, giving us a glimpse of a motley convoy of vehicles worthy of a "Mad Max" movie: 1950s Russian tractors were chained or roped to rusty dumptrucks, in turn hooked to other trucks or trailers, with the 20-vehicle train, and grungy drivers and workmen, apparently waiting to unload a ship, not visible. Equally striking were the many wood/charcoal-powered trucks seen north of Pyongyang, each with a large smoking barrel on the flatbed, moving along at good speed.

¶5. (C) We shared the roads with oxcarts, people pushing wheelbarrows with metal wheels, and, above all, people riding women's-style one-speed bikes, said to be imported from Japan. Bicyclists often carried another rider or bundles, and got off to walk on any slope; having multiple gears would be a step forward. We passed three aspiring hitchhikers on the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway, waving a hand up and down rather than extending a thumb, but did not see any get picked up. The sense was that "commuting" on foot or by bike was a large part of people's day. A Swedish Embassy officer in Pyongyang later told us that local employees have to walk miles into the countryside each Sunday morning, their day of assigned farmwork, because all public transportation is closed that day.

¶6. (C) After we passed many broken-down vehicles, one of our sedans broke down too after a sudden drop in oil pressure. With no way to communicate after losing sight of that car,

the driver of the lead vehicle waited by the side of the road for some time, then turned around into the oncoming lanes (empty of traffic) and proceeded slowly back until the first car was spotted. We piled into the one remaining vehicle until a replacement vehicle, another light blue 1980 Mercedes, caught up to us later in the afternoon. We saw only two gas stations in Pyongyang, one out of sight behind a gate (but with a gas pump sign in front) and the other for the diplomatic community. Outside of Pyongyang we saw none, but our minder told us in Huichon that he had just gotten gas in the area, paying USD 22 (he quoted the price in dollars) for 15 kg, which amounts to about USD 4 per gallon.

GREEN FIELDS

¶17. (SBU) In all rural areas we saw what looked like lush farmland, with signs that all available land, such as the shoulders of roads, was being used for crops, as many observers have reported. Along both sides of the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway there was a one-to-three mile wide band of rice growing in flooded fields on level ground and corn and other crops on sloped areas.

¶18. (SBU) Along much of the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway there were straight rows of hardwood trees three to ten deep, a seemingly ornamental touch. We also saw many hillsides covered with hardwood and pine trees, without any signs of hillsides deforested by people in search of firewood, as has been reported. That said, we did see steep hillsides outside of Huichon and in Tongshin being used for growing corn; perhaps these areas had previously been deforested. In Huichon, we saw a number of trucks carrying logs pass through town, as well as a small lumber mill (an outdoor shed with one bandsaw) and stacks of rough boards drying next to a food warehouse there, signs of an artisanal lumber industry.

¶19. (SBU) In the fields, men and women were bent over working with hand tools or no tools, oxcarts pulled plows, and only one tractor moved. More often, Soviet-era tractors towed trailers or other vehicles on roads. These images of manual farming are consistent with what tourists to Mt. Kungang or Kaesong City see when traversing a few miles of North Korean farms enroute.

¶110. (SBU) At our the Huichon Hotel, which was surrounded by onion, bean, squash and cabbage fields, as well as pig stalls, chicken pens and fish ponds, the proprietor said that she used no fertilizer other than animal waste. On the wall were pictures of Kim Jong-il visiting the hotel/farm in the late 1990s, when he cited it as an exemplary food producer. There were many signs of home gardens: behind a backyard wall of a house in Unsan, and around the edges of many apartment buildings, corn or other crops were growing.

VILLAGE PEOPLE

¶111. (SBU) In Huichon, with instructions not to leave the hotel grounds during our two mornings and evenings of downtime, we spent several hours watching residents go back and forth on its paved main street, seeing a random sample of passersby during these unscheduled periods (as well as later from the hotel windows). There was a sense of normality and orderly routine as men, women and children biked or walked by, dressed for work. (There are reportedly ceramic and metallurgical factories in the area that we did not see.) Most wore black or grey pants or skirts and white shirts, some carrying books or notebooks, and broke out umbrellas when it rained; they wore decent canvas or leather-type shoes. Most children wore uniforms of black pants and white shirts, some with red kerchiefs.

¶112. (SBU) Apart from the lack of cars, neon lights, shops, advertising, newspapers, cellphones and other electronics, colorful clothing or jewelry (except for the Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il pins that a few wore), the view of this street

scene in Huichon could have been of a South Korean town. On our second morning, coincidentally, July 4, a five-piece brass and flute band at a college across the street from the hotel began the day with a few tunes as teenage-looking students, girls in pleated black skirts and boys wearing red and black ties, ran into the main building at 0700; few passers-by paused to listen. During the several hours we watched this street, only one soldier, armed with a rifle, passed by, though in Huichon and the other villages we passed what looked like an Army garrison near the center of each town; we saw no police. More generally, there were no visible signs of police or other authority directing people's activities, though clearly people were not at leisure.

¶13. (C) Some scenes looked odd: dozens of small children (looking 5-7, but possibly older) hustled separately in one direction past the gate of our hotel at 0630 in the morning on July 3, with no adults in view, carrying hand brooms or dustpans. Asked about this later, KAPES official Shin explained that they "volunteered" each morning to clean the Kim Il-sung monument in the main square; he then launched into a monologue about how the people loved Kim Il-sung for all he had done. Also in the morning, a siren sounded at 0700 and a distant speaker announced what must have been the day's propaganda announcement. Otherwise, the sense of quiet was noticeable, especially because no one seemed to stop and talk to each other. The exception was a small group gathered on a corner near the river, apparently fixing bikes and pumping up tires.

¶14. (SBU) Like the children carrying brooms, virtually all of the children we saw were engaged in some organized activity: marching in rows along the sides of roads in "Young Pioneer" outfits, practicing for what our minders said was the Arirang games in the main square in Pyongyang, repairing dirt roads, or apparently heading to or from school. The exceptions were a few small boys playing in a puddle in Hyangsan and other small boys seen swimming in the Cheoncheong river.

¶15. (C) We saw similar conditions--basic but not squalid, with people seeming to have a place to go--in the other towns we visited near Huichon: Unsan (where Chinese troops first engaged U.S. forces in November 1950), Tongshin and Hyangsan. However, Songrim, the port town southwest of Pyongyang, looked more obviously poor. Barefoot children ran through ditches and houses seen in passing looked very shoddy and dirty (but still had glass windows). The only vehicles seen belonged to port officials or were part of the motley chain of vehicles mentioned above. Although pictures were generally allowed on our trip, we were asked not to take pictures in Songrim.

¶16. (SBU) The lack of stores and merchandise was striking both in Pyongyang and elsewhere. A rare sign of commercial activity was a blue and red painting of a barber pole on the side of a building in "downtown" Huichon. Many of the streets in Pyongyang looked like those of dying U.S. downtowns, with ground-floor plate glass windows looking like storefronts, but with the space behind usually empty or holding only a few items, and no signs at all. About 200 meters west of the Koryo hotel (hence in the area that visitors can explore without minders in tow), we entered an unmarked, dimly lit department store, with an interior sign indicating several floors of merchandise. About 60 people had taken shelter from the rain inside, but no one was buying. Most were crowded around a TV playing karaoke tunes, while others looked at a large selection of eyeglasses (2,000-5,000 North Korean Won, or NKW), six bicycles (60,000-100,000 NKW), men's dress shirts, or a few pairs of shoes. In another section, glass cases held crumbling bags of sandwich cookies, bottles of orange soda and "soju" liquor. Time did not allow us to see the other floors.

MILITARY PRESENCE

¶17. (C) We saw fewer signs of the military than expected. On

the highways, soldiers holding small red flags, usually wearing pistols or carrying collapsible-stock AK 47 type rifles, were spaced 20 km or so apart in groups of two-to-three, watching traffic, but letting our cars (probably identifiable as belonging to MFA) pass. With traffic so sparse on the road to Nampo, a soldier stood in the middle of the oncoming lanes but did not wave us down. Apart from such sentries, we saw no soldiers on the Pyongyang-Huichon expressway except for those riding in an occasional military truck or bus. We were told later that each offramp from that expressway had a military guard post, not seen from the road.

¶18. (C) The most overt sign of military control was a checkpoint about 25 km from Pyongyang on the way back from Huichon. All vehicles, including ours, pulled off the highway into a 200-meter long section of widened dirt road behind a stand of trees with guard gates at the entrance and exit. We spent about ten minutes waiting, while our minders got out of the cars to apparently explain to the guards who we were. Here, as at the port of Songrim, there were hints of interagency confusion as our minders held minutes-long discussions with guards, armed with rifles, before we could proceed. A total of 15 guards were visible, with indications that there were likely more present outside of our line of sight. The guards were dressed in what appeared to be enlisted military uniforms. While we waited at the checkpoint, a bus next to us was being searched seat-by-seat.

The sense was that only those authorized could proceed to Pyongyang, at least by road. Later, when we were returning from the Pyongyang diplomatic compound to the Koryo Hotel at about 2330 on July 4, a soldier stepped into the street at an intersection and stopped our car, letting us proceed after a brief explanation from our minder.

DPRK OFFICIALS INTERESTED

¶19. (C) Host officials from the Korean American Private Exchange Society (KAPES), an MFA offshoot set up in 2006 to deal with U.S. NGOs, met us at the airport on arrival, arranged for the our car "rental" at a non-negotiable 75 euros per vehicle per day, and accompanied us on all of our travels. These "minders," especially 35-year-old Shin Song-ho, recently seconded from the Ministry of Environment because of his English skills, veered between offering set pieces about the Kim Jong-il and the evils of the U.S. war in Iraq--unjustified because the U.S. homeland was not attacked--and expressing cautious interest in both the U.S. and South Korea. During the early part of the trip, Shin seemed to want to keep his distance. We were surprised to see him listening to an MP3 player on the way back from Nampo on July 1. Asked what he was listening to, he answered vaguely that it was a mixture of different music downloaded from CDs, not specifying whether any were South Korean.

¶20. (C) During several days of travel, Shin became more open, telling us that his father studied French in Paris and now teaches French at a Pyongyang University, that his parents live with him, and that his wife is an elementary school teacher. Even for his (elite) family, Shin said, biweekly food distributions had been reduced during recent months, but he could not say by how much because his mother and wife dealt with such household issues. Asked how the family was coping, he said everyone was simply eating less, except for his five-year-old daughter; he didn't answer when asked about the possibility of buying food at markets. He added that there were rolling blackouts at different times, usually lasting for about four hours during several days each week in his neighborhood. He was curious about life in Seoul, universities in the U.S., and recent movies, some of which he had heard about, but stayed away from political issues such as ROK-DPRK relations or the Six-Party Talks.

¶21. (C) Kim Yong-suk, the senior KAPES official handling our delegation, from MFA's North America Division, was much more guarded, although expressed interest in the U.S. presidential

election. Kim cut down social interaction time with our delegation by having us eat our meals by ourselves. He rejected our requests to see markets, as part of the effort to understand food distribution.

¶22. (C) Kim Shi-hyuk, External Affairs Officer for Chagang Province, asked blunt questions, through Mr. Shin as interpreter, during our drive from Huichon to Tongshin: is it true that Americans make USD 10,000 per month; how often do Americans go to church; do South Korean children have cellphones? Based in Chagang's capital Kanggye, about 100 km north of Huichon, Kim seemed in no hurry to get back there, staying the night on July 3 to see us off for the trip back to Pyongyang on the morning of July 4.

COMMENT

¶23. (C) Compared to often alarmist descriptions of North Korea's dire conditions, our windshield tour of Pyongyang, countryside and several towns instead showed a low-income but functioning society. The caveats are that we did not see the insides of any dwellings, and that DPRK officials obviously selected the areas that we were allowed to see. It would be tempting to describe the slice of rural North Korea that we saw as typical of an agrarian developing country (we saw almost no signs of industry), on the lower rungs before the arrival of motorcycles and other consumer goods. The problem with that description is that, while the North Korea we saw does not seem to be falling apart, neither does it appear to be moving ahead, or developing. Visible from the dirt road to Unsan were the dilapidated remnants of concrete support pillars for a highway that was never built. Looking at the streets of Huichon or the whitewashed cooperative farms that we often passed along the road, there was a sense of timelessness: the view could have been of 1960, 1950, or even earlier considering the lack of motor vehicles, farm equipment, or other basics.

¶24. (C) In Pyongyang too, the sense was that the city was built with Soviet help and that the buildings and infrastructure from that era are still all there is. The only examples of active construction we saw were what was described as a new hotel and a row of restaurants under renovation next to the Koryo Hotel. A crane atop the long unfinished pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel seemed to be motionless the few times that we saw it.

¶25. (C) In the northern towns of Huichon, Unsan and Tongshin, the local residents seemed to be living in an information vacuum. The televisions at our hotel in Huichon did not even receive the main "Choson" channel; we did not have access to any radios (our drivers played the same cassette tapes of patriotic music over and over). In both Huichon and Tongshin, we heard loudspeakers broadcasting what were apparently propaganda announcements, and we wondered whether that amounted to the only outside "news" that many locals were exposed to each day. North Korea watchers often wonder what North Korean authorities are telling their own people about particular events -- say the July 11 Mt. Kumgang shooting. In Huichon and the other areas we visited, a plausible answer seemed to be: nothing.

¶26. (C) An eerie aspect of the towns we observed was the sense of public order, without any overt sign of authority. Swedish Embassy officer Ingrid Johanssen, completing four years in Pyongyang, explained that North Koreans have required behavior patterns inculcated by an early age, so no guidance is needed. The most rebellious behavior she had experienced was when canoeing on the Taedong River that runs through Pyongyang, when young North Koreans would stealthily ease close to her canoe to have a chat, only to have a guard on a nearby bank whistle at them to move along. The social behavior we saw in Huichon was reminiscent of Kim Jong-il's "On the Art of the Cinema" (1989): "In our society today, all the working people jointly manage state and social property and take good care of them. They voluntarily

maintain public order, helping each other and leading each other forward."

¶27. (C) The lack of dynamism we saw in the DPRK countryside also looked like stability. One can imagine the residents of Unsan and Tongshin, and their descendants, riding their bikes and working in the fields for decades to come, seemingly insulated from outside information, short of some external change. Like the Mercedes sedans we rode in, this is an economic and social model that clearly can't last forever, but it can go a while longer.

VERSHBOW